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# Does the “Anabaptist Vision” Fit the Mennonite Churches of Central America?

by Mario Higueros

I speak from a realistic and painful reality, but, at the same time, a reality that is full of hope. This hope is rooted in our biblical heritage that emerges in spite of tears, pain, and injustices. Here are a few ideas about doing theology in Central America.

This theology is done by sisters and brothers who, for the most part, cannot read nor write and whose economic situation obliges them to consume their meager pay before they receive it. This is a theology of the road, temporary in character. It is done in the dusty and dangerous path of life and not from the security of the theological balcony.<sup>1</sup>

It is a theology that develops among the workers in agriculture plots and trans-national factories, among the street vendors and the washing-ironing ladies working in strangers' residences.

This theology is not written. It is sung, it is lived, it is suffered daily amid incredible social and economic circumstances. It is a theology taken from daily life and the Bible as a “mirror-hermeneutic” that reflects our pain and anxieties. That's why many in our setting favor a focus on concrete biblical themes such as the Exodus.

The persecuted and tortured Anabaptists described in the preface of *The Martyrs Mirror* are an exact and terrible picture of what many Christians are suffering

today in Guatemala. And yet, today, as in the time of the Anabaptist beginnings, ironically, the joy of faith emerges in the life and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

What does it mean to do theology in a setting of basic survival?

## **Economic Survival**

In most Central American countries, natural resources are simply not found in abundance. The primary interest of both internal and external economic powers has been to exploit our cheap labor. And now Central American people also live under the heavy weight of foreign debts brought on by high interest and usury.<sup>2</sup> Most of our people are preoccupied with surviving, which is aggravated by worldwide practices that protect First World economic systems, even though many people are dying of hunger.

## **Political Survival**

Physically eliminating people is one practice used to subdue the social dissatisfaction of large sectors of our society. The threat to life is constantly present, not only from the normal dangers in our streets and the military strategies, but by systems that compromise our future and any hope to supersede our dire poverty.<sup>3</sup>

One strategy that is commonly used is to divide our



peoples. Violence and terror are methods used to maintain power. These tactics reach into all social strata and consequently affect the life of the church. For example, from 1982-1984, one denomination in Guatemala lost 10% of its members due to the military implementing a scorched earth policy.

The economic and political power systems continue to be militaristic and autocratic, following the pattern of a quasi-feudal church-state relationship. Since the 16th century and to our day, this pattern continues. It provides the structures for a careful, official control of all means of production, marketing, and political systems.

Social benefits, as well as secular and theological education, continue to be accessible to only a privileged minority. Education, in general, as well as theology, has always come to our countries from foreign interests and a colonial heritage. So even education contributes to legitimizing oppressive and exploitive policies. Our present educational systems are about a century old; they continue to maintain most of the paternalistic educational philosophy and structures of 19th century liberalism.<sup>4</sup>

## Religious Survival

The theologies we have been taught have certainly left their marks. The Reformed-"Evangelistic" variety, primarily from North America, and the traditional European hierarchical, dogmatic Catholic theology both reinforce an educational-theological dependency style that accommodates itself to the status quo. The presence of numerous denominational groups representing "evangelicalism" reinforce a theology that also legitimizes the status quo, including direct and indirect justification of war and violence. Furthermore, they emphasize an individualistic pietism that divorces faith from the realities of life.

Many of the Reformed-evangelical missions taught that the soul was of primary value. They understood their presence and mission to be divorced from peoples' social and political needs, even though the latter were the cause of many of their own members' suffering.

During the '70s a new generation of churches developed from the North. These churches are convinced that political participation is necessary, but from a hermeneutic that equates the will of God with North American government politics—first, as "God's defense against communism and its evil empires," and second, that

realizing the kingdom of God means grasping the "American Dream." These churches occupy themselves not only in "saving souls for Christ," but in enticing already established Christian groups to join their cause against liberation theology, which they understand to be only another ideology undermining sound doctrine.

## Mennonite Churches

Most of the Mennonite churches that were founded during the '60s were strongly influenced by various North American evangelical currents. This happened because the theological basis of North American Mennonite missions was greatly influenced by conservative evangelicals in the U.S. and Canada. Other Mennonite churches are the result of alliances with independent leaders and groups that, for one reason or another, adopted the name "Mennonite," as they might just as readily have adopted any other denominational name. In reality, at that time, one could rarely note any significant theological, liturgical, or pastoral differences between Mennonites and other evangelical churches. In fact, many of these church alliances and their principal leaders brought with them a primarily Pentecostal background.

## Resistance to Christian Theology

Today there is a widespread resistance to these varieties of Christian theology among Catholics and Protestants and, in fact, among all who confess to follow—or not to follow—Jesus Christ. Yet since the time of Vatican Council II, the Catholic church here in



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Central America has been experiencing a decisive renewal. Here and there "base communities" have emerged in place of private faith. They see serving the world as another way of living the Gospel.

Their communities do not understand themselves as just one more reshaping of the Gospel to the socio-political realm. These Christians do not pretend to supplant the secular world. But they try to illuminate and evaluate their world so the kingdom of God can be realized within that world.

These groups, however, are in the minority in the Catholic church, whose hierarchies continue in Medieval-Age darkness. Even so, these base community groups are surging as a way of being church, and they will not likely join the Protestants. They are the germ of a new church and a new evangelization. Those outside the church will sooner or later be evangelized by sisters and brothers who, more than belonging to a particular confessional group, live out kingdom faith and commitment among the most needy in the world.

Finally, I want to explain that our Christian formation in Central America is taking place in an atmosphere of theological resistance from yet another quarter. This resistance is against a Christianity that frequently allies itself with culturally and socially oppressive systems. I refer to the indigenous faiths which were readily identified as "pagan" by Christians, who then made them the object of their mission.

Christianity is now being rejected by indigenous faiths which had earlier been victimized by the rigid and uncompromising attitudes of Christian missions.

The confrontation itself is a challenge, but, more than that, the vital, living presence of these faiths

causes us to reflect on the authenticity of our own faith. The so-called monopoly of western religion is no longer accepted. Many voices from within and without Christian circles are pushing us to reflect on God as one not limited to a given theological heritage.

The poverty and marginalization of indigenous peoples makes us keenly aware of the inadequacy of a religious Christian faith that is primarily "believed" rather than "lived." What we are also realizing is that those who follow indigenous beliefs have so much to teach us in the areas of worship, faith, and ethics.

How, in the face of all this, can we speak of a God that is good and that provides? How, when presented with all these problems, do we speak of a God of justice and judgment, especially among abused and persecuted people? It is very difficult to speak of the justice of God in the presence of gross injustices. And how much more troublesome for a "First World" Christian to speak of a just God, while the First World's technology and economy support a system that keeps many persons trapped in terrible subhuman conditions.

## A Theological Challenge

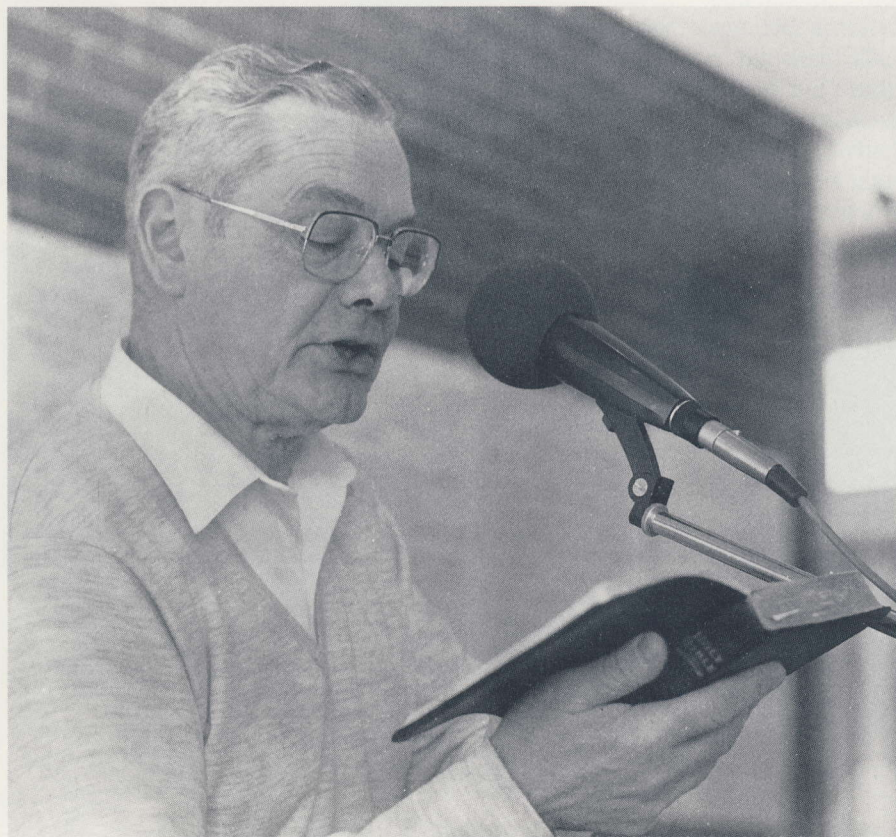
With this kind of sad panorama as a background in our Guatemalan experience, what is theology?

Theology need not be written to be theology, since intellectualism and rationalism are not elements that determine or qualify theology. Furthermore, how could explicit theology be formed in countries like ours where large sectors of society cannot read or write? So the alternative is to either "import" theologies or to create a theology in harmony with our particular needs and worldview.

Latin American theology (also called liberation theology) places the doing of theology among the tasks of the faith community. First, there is a reflection on experience, and only then is it written. Theology is incarnated in the actual. Many past Anabaptist theologians, as well as some of us today, insist that the essence of theology is its practice. This makes discipleship one of the principle elements of our Anabaptist theology. Latin American theology today calls it "following Christ." The German term *nachfolge*, as I understand it, indicates precisely this.

Little by little we have been finding that the Anabaptists didn't write theology and that their theological writings weren't intended to be systematic. The theology for many of them was more implicit in their lives, rather than explicit in theological formulations.

Christian practice does not come out of a formulation. On the contrary, first comes action and then the word of explanation or definition.



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Fifty years ago Harold Bender identified three characteristics of Anabaptism that helped Christians at that time know who they were, why they were here, and where they were going. Bender presented what society in his time needed in the face of the anxiety it experienced with war: a new ethic that would review human conduct in the face of hate, egoism, and rivalry. He offered a new social horizon that would give humanity a new sense of belonging in the face of uprootedness and alienation, and a new, old Christian practice that would establish the church's mission to be peacemakers in the world.

It is surprising how we in Central America today are living in circumstances very similar to those of the peasants of 16th century Europe. These circumstances force us to theologize in a way that addresses our needs and offers hope. That's why we modern Anabaptists must ask if the making of dogmatic theological formulations is not contradicting much of our own theological inheritance. This questioning process is very serious for training institutions such as SEMILLA (the Latin American Mennonite Seminary) that attempt to teach Anabaptist theology. How can one formulate that which is not "formulate-able"? The rationale for theological exercise makes sense only when it emerges as a reflection on the experience of faith.

How then can we build a body of ideas without simply importing "sound, orthodox Anabaptism?" We need, instead, a body of thought to help us discover our mission and, at the same time, maintain our chosen identity. How can we write the history of the suffering of our people when doctrinal prejudices exist that already define a vision? I suggest the following thoughts resulting from our searching experience in Central America.

1. A living Anabaptist theology results by affirming life in the constant face of death.
2. A living Anabaptist theology seeks unity in the constant presence of divisions.
3. A living Anabaptist theology practices justice and peace in the constant presence of alienation.

## Affirming Life in the Constant Face of Death

*Human life and the life around us are the concrete expression of God's project. Threats against life are an insult to the Creator.*

Our formative programs must emphasize a theology of creation. In many places the synthetic and the imported are imposed upon us as more valuable than our own products. It is important that we return to the biblical emphasis that gives priority to life. This biblical principle leads us to give priority to the human element instead of to the accumulation of power, goods, and capital. To give priority to humanity leads to having a love for life, whereas excessive emphasis on capital and production only leads to a love for death.

We must try to create a theology that does not indirectly support contaminating and bloodletting systems. Instead, we must cooperate in making Central



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America a more just and human place. Today, like never before, the future of the world depends on the creation of a conscience for the preservation of life on our planet.

Practicing a biblical theology of creation means finding ways for men and women to have lives of dignity and to satisfy their basic needs. A Nicaraguan pastor recently told me, "I dread Sunday because more than one member of my church will tell me he has no way to get food for his children. What can I do other than share the little that the church gives to me, their pastor—\$20 a month."

To struggle with people for their life is to be one with the Creator. To favor an economic system, rather than human needs, is to be one with death.

Teaching that is based solely on thematic-doctrinal contents leads to favoring dogmas, creeds, and particular confessions, instead of the life of human beings. To paraphrase the words of Jesus, this type of teaching lives and serves the Sabbath day more than the human persons that live on the Sabbath.

Excessive interest in learning and textual criticism of our theological formation have left to one side the valuable contents of the creation story expressed in the biblical text, especially in the book of Genesis. This leads us to ignore human experience as a valid source for understanding creation. Lay theology, which claims to be nonsystematic and to ignore our educational institutions, has pointed the way back to the core concept of creation with a clear vision of the world and life itself. That's why the people emphasize the practice



of uniting religion with harvest and celebration days.

We have reduced Christology to a system of theological thought, to a kind of catechism, as some "saint to worship." It has been converted to something to believe rather than to be lived. To persist in this is to consent to human control. It results in worshiping our understanding of God rather than God.

Societies with imposed power structures separate daily life from spirituality. Therefore, it is to their advantage to emphasize things to believe rather than examples to imitate.

Our theology should favor a Christology of being disciples of Jesus. This Christology must be developed from below, from the human realm where humans suffer as Jesus suffered.

As Hans Küng says, "Concepts are mute and cannot respond. They are rigid and implacable."<sup>5</sup> It is very different to pursue discipleship and a following-after of a concrete personality like Jesus, whose adaptability and human transparency make the Christian life possible, and not some fantastic unreachable idea. In this sense, the exclusive practice of systematizing theology reinforces rigidity, intransigency, and the imposing of political systems.

Jesus is the sum of the revelation of God because He incarnates the suffering of the world. This suffering is also seen in creation which foretells that life must first die in the depths of the earth.

Our Anabaptist vision emerges from whole peoples suffering in Central America. In the last 20 years, many have bled at the hands of their own authorities. Pastors, priests, religious workers, and many members of our congregations form a "cloud of witnesses," calling for justice and giving testimony of salvation, just as we're told in Hebrews 11.

We have here a challenge for our congregations and biblical theological institutions—to attain theological

methods and content that lead students of the Bible and theology to follow Jesus, rather than making rambling discourses on theories about Jesus.

Formative programs should emphasize the way toward a participatory ecclesiology.

When Christian churches become exclusive, they forfeit their rich diversity and fall into the trap of becoming alienating gatherings. Too often, a clericalism inhibits community life and we fail to understand pastoral work as a mission of being incarnated into society around us. We need to see ministry as tools for the faith community and the world, and not as aspiring stars for a cause. Our programs should not accept students so they can become pastors, but because they already are. Our focus should not be to create a pastoral profession, but to assist in creating a sense of pastoral vocation. This would be the best title or credit we could grant.

To affirm an ecclesiology of pastoral community is to affirm the life of the body of Christ and to minimize the super-structures that give our congregations so many headaches.

By focusing on developing a biblical pastoral approach, we are really promoting training communities. Training should not come from the seminaries in the sense that they dictate norms to follow. The institutions' expertise should be to "plant the problematic," and then to bring together a synthesis of the experiences of the faith communities, rather than to be the creators of compendiums of answers.

In this way, our congregations can be creators of life and will reflect the image of a communicative God who participates and allows participation. Thus, by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, believers are freed from theological and ecclesiological dependency and become owners of their own destiny. Believers who live in this way practice a theology of solidarity, sharing with others what they have. Only in giving are they imitating Jesus Christ, who is the gracious incarnation of the Word of God.

## Seeking Unity in the Constant Presence of Divisions

*Unity is the essence and nature of God and humanity. All intent to destroy this unity implies separation, which is adverse to the nature of God's being and God's will that humanity reflect God's image.*

For centuries, the warrior axiom of "divide and conquer" has continued to function effectively. Military manuals and practices today express the strategy in sophisticated ways.

Our small Central American countries continue to be politically divided, with the governments in frank opposition to the nature of their populations. One needs only travel by land in Central America to become keenly aware of the difficulties and uncompromising border crossing barriers that hinder the economies and free commercial and human interchange.

Our people have been enslaved to patriotic signs and symbols that merely represent the limits of power. It



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isn't necessary to be a Central American to observe that if Central American economic production were more integrated from country to country, the scene would be totally different. But personal interests and the monopolies of power by a scarce five to eight percent of the population in each country continues our backwardness. It is as Xavier Gorostiaga, a Spanish economist nationalized in Panama, says, "What is in collapse here is a power model that no longer addresses the social dissatisfactions."

We must ask ourselves if our theological programs, which in many cases are very local and denominational, are reinforcing and reproducing this form of structural sin. Our programs must develop identity, but not at the expense of reinforcing division under the pretext of a supposed coherent ecclesiology and theology.

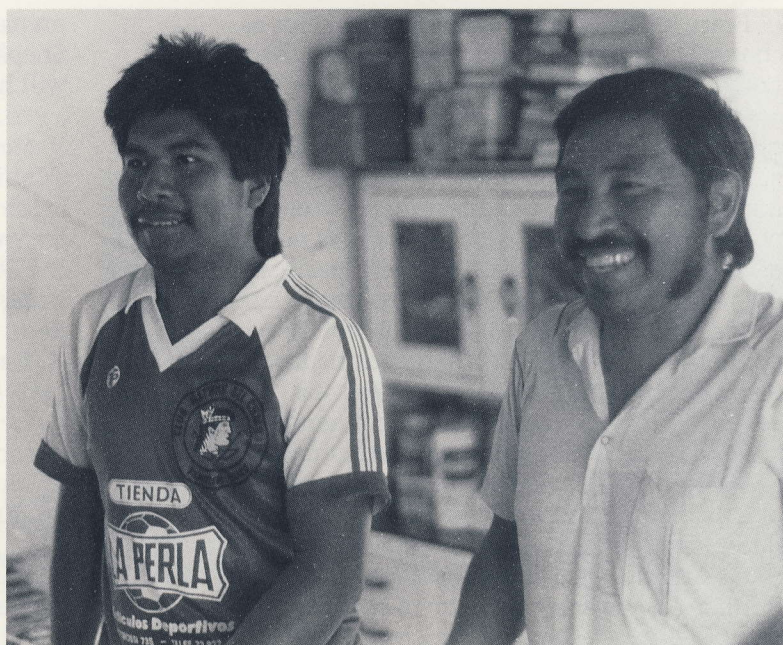
The people of Central America are creating a theology of solidarity and unity that empowers them for living. Its preparation is diverse, but coherent with the reality for this area of the world where more than half the people cannot read and write, but where they nevertheless live the faith and hope of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Frequently the distorted doctrine of the church, the self-importance of the theological institutions, and the para-church aspect of our theological programs, are forms which drown the message of salvation. Theology then becomes captive of magisterial programs and high academic studies. It lacks adequate content because it arises from these programs' own agenda and not from the living body of Christ, which is the local community of faith.

All dividedness is death: curriculums separated from reality, traditional and progressive fundamentalism, power conflicts, homicides, wars, divorce in the family. All bear the mark of separations, weeping, and pain. To the indigenous religions that are commonly accused of polytheism, we present our particular doctrinal emphases that sound more like "creed-olotry."

Unity in the biblical sense is essential. It is basic and not a methodological strategy. It must be seen as more than organizational and, instead, as a way of being or a style of life. Our life as believers must be coherent with the realities we live. How can we preach unity when we live with the anxieties of the rich in the middle of a commiserating society? How can we eat our abundant bread peacefully when many people in the world die from lack of bread?<sup>6</sup>

Christian formation is primarily caught. So to those being formed, the teaching person must demonstrate a style of life coherent with the Gospel and the situation within which they both live. Christianity doesn't proceed from doctrine but from following Jesus. Therefore, one of the requirements to be an apostle of the Lord was to have lived with Him. The world is tired of words, discourses, and oratory, even phrases full of good theology, none of which go beyond being an



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intellectual exercise.

True faith community should be the result of theological formation whose content was modeled by God in incarnating the Son Jesus. Authentic evangelical human fellowship leads to divine fellowship.

## Practicing Justice and Peace in the Constant Presence of Alienation

*Peace is a sign of hope that reconciles, satisfies, integrates, and harmonizes God's creation. All powers that attempt to be lord exercise violence which does not stand before God.*

Theology has been used to legitimize wars. In this process, theologians have played a major role. It was thought in the past that the gods participated in wars and weaknesses. The people of Israel misinterpreted their own prophetic heritage by appealing to God for their wars, just as many Christians today don't understand that Yahweh's participation in human life is different than that of the gods of other nations. A theology that attributes bloody war victories to "the arm of God" leads to blasphemy. The salvation promises of the "arm of God" are powerful precisely because they do not use the forms and methods of the pagan peoples in their wars.

The reign of Constantine was a sad example of a time in which God was identified with human powers. The Medieval Crusades also demonstrated the human intention to use God to create sacred places. The martyrdom of Anabaptists at the hands of the Reformers and the Catholic "holy inquisition" are other sad examples of how orthodox zeal identified with violent processes and arbitrary dehumanization.

In Central America the just wars of the Spanish Conquest still cause us pain, even after five centuries have passed. The European colonizations of North America, Asia, Africa, and Oceania were legitimized by theologians who saw the design of God in them.



Peace as Jesus taught and lived it is not easy nor cheap, because it is a suffering, pilgrim theology, and not a peace proceeding from the security of power and complicity. Nowadays many Christians, heirs of past persecution and poverty, cannot risk civil disobedience against their war-making governments, because they now live in opulence and fear losing their privileged positions. Nevertheless, today there is no place for so-called neutrality, silence, and cheap pacifism, for they are part of the theology that upholds the status quo.<sup>7</sup>

It requires courage to promote biblical peace. It is a peace that is neither anesthetic nor neutralizing, but disturbing and disquieting. This peace is an anticipation and sign of the fullness of God that denounces injustice, while proposing ways of human relationships. The peace that Jesus gives to the faith community is not like that which the world gives.

Biblical peace is a style of life, and the nature of those who are daughters and sons of God (Matthew 5:9). It is the evangelizing force of those who are suffering martyrdom and which completes the sufferings of Christ in salvation (II Corinthians 1:3-7). As peacemakers, we are not called to "sacral-ize" any war, regardless of how just it might seem. Nor are we to impede the determination of people on their road to freedom. Instead, we are called to empower life and liberty along with other women and men of good will, who exercise pressure on First World countries to not arm Third World countries, and thus discourage armed confrontation, pain, and death.

The women and men of Central America live with threats to their lives, joy in the middle of persecution, hope where there is no hope—a context in which they are illuminated by the Good News of salvation. This Good News declares life in the face of systems of death and unites, by the grace of God, that which sin divides. It reconciles enemies in the middle of wars and

prepares a new heaven and a new earth where the Shepherd of shepherds, our beloved Lord Jesus Christ, will heal all pain and tears.

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Translated into English by Amzie Yoder.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Juan A. Mackay, *El Otro Cristo Espanol (The Other Spanish Christ)* (Ediciones Semilla, Guatemala, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> *The World Bank Atlas*, 1994, reports in an extensive article the following data: Guatemala—infant mortality 58% (1992), gross income per capita \$980 (1992), foreign debt \$3000 million (1993), unemployment 42.6%, including underemployment (1990), illiteracy 45%. Nicaragua—infant mortality 53%, gross income per capita \$410 (1992), foreign debt \$11,126 million, unemployment 12% (1990), illiteracy 19% (1990). *Country Report*, The Economist Intelligence Unit, 1993-1994.

<sup>3</sup> In 1982, following the principle that "fish can be trapped by eliminating their water," the army decided to eliminate more than a hundred villages considered to be the logistical bases for the guerrilla forces.

<sup>4</sup> Antonio Nunez, a well-known and respected, evangelical seminary professor wrote the following in the Christian daily newspaper, *La Palabra* (9/84), "... it is not strange that many say that the Gospel has not been a factor to encourage social change, but rather the preservation of the established order. It is clear that the acclaimed 'Protestant apolitical' position has consciously or unconsciously favored forces that resist social transformation... The coincidence of USA economic expansionism and the beginning and progress of Protestant missions in Guatemala cannot be denied. Furthermore, it is evident that there was a certain ideological affinity between Protestantism and Guatemalan liberalism."

<sup>5</sup> Hans Küng, *Ser Cristiano* (Ed. Cristiandad, Madrid, 1977), 690.

<sup>6</sup> In our countries, hundreds of families are divided by wars or economic conditions. Many times principal family members have to live and work in North America for the family to survive. President Clinton recently stiffened U.S. refugee policies. The government of El Salvador strongly protested this since nearly a third of El Salvador's national income comes from Salvadorans who live and work in North America and send support to their relatives.

<sup>7</sup> In August, 1993, the coordinating organization of Guatemalan widows, CONAVIGUA, proposed a law called "patriotic civil and military service." This proposal asks for military service to be truly voluntary. It asks that no one be forced to participate in the military and that everyone have the right to conscientious objection and that a social service be created to address the many social needs of our country (*El Grafico*, 8/30/93). At the risk of their very lives, an increasing number of Christian youth in Honduras and El Salvador are choosing to be conscientious objectors to war and military careers.



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